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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to develop a profile of the mature woman who seeks a postsecondary education, to ascertain the personal and social reasons that influence an adult woman to return to school, and to describe the interpersonal adjustments that accompany this change in life-style. Data were collected via a 50-item fixed-response questionnaire that was completed by 151 older female students at two colleges (Cedar Crest Woman's College and Lehigh County Community College). In addition, relatives of two-thirds of the respondents completed the forms. The results of the study showed that the students responding were white (97 percent) and have had some previous college experience. The ages of the respondents ranged from 22 to 65 with the median category 30-34 years old. Sixty percent of the students were married, the majority of their husbands had college degrees, and the families were relatively affluent. Almost two-thirds of the women had children (four for older women, two for younger women). More than half of the respondents were employed. All of the participants viewed their education as a self-enriching, self-initiated experience for which they had long-term personal or professional goals. Most had superior academic performances. Based on the data obtained in this study, it was concluded that the major problem areas for these students were exam anxiety, time allotment, and role conflict. The women in this study struggled with doubts and overcame obstacles to continue their personal growth. (KC)

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Doubt, Struggle and Growth: A Profile of the Mature Woman in the Student Role

A Summary of a Thesis for Master of Arts
in Social Relations
Lehigh University, 1984

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Double, Struggle and Growth: A Profile of the Mature Woman in the Student Role

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Introduction

The purpose of this research was to develop a profile of the mature woman who seeks a post secondary education. Additionally, the attempt was made to ascertain the personal and social reasons which influence an adult female to return to school, and to describe the interpersonal adjustments which accompany this change in life style.

This research is the result of a cross-sectional study of women in continuing education programs. The data from this study illustrates a change in the structure of college populations. National statistics indicate that more than 40% of students enrolled in degree programs are over twenty-five, and 56% of these adult learners are women.

Despite the fact that the increasing numbers of older students are financial lifesavers for colleges, specific barriers confront these adult learners. These barriers are sociological, social, and personal.

A brief review of the literature illustrates some of the obstacles which confront a woman who resumes the student role. For several decades an equilibrium model has been a dominant influence, and few social scientists have emphasized the capacity of the individual to change over time. Buhler, an early pioneer, described five life cycle phases. Valliant, Gould, and Levinson developed theories of adult development in stages over the years, although their studies were male oriented.

All these theorists stressed that human beings experience major life events in basically sequential order. Bernice Neugarten studied the meanings with which society invested "age appropriate" behavior. Since our society ascribes status due to the factors of age and sex, unique social norms govern women's proper roles at certain ages. Thus a significant concern for re-entry women is the fear of being a misfit on the campus. Neugarten concluded that during intervals of rapid social change, the timing of life's events became less regular, causing age to lose its customary meaning.

Another obstacle facing the continuing education woman is society's tendency to cast the older female in an ideal nurturing role. Socialization practices have prescribed the bearing and rearing of children as woman's central task in life. For the woman who wishes to expand her life style, motherhood versus personal ambition represents the core of a very real and particularly feminine dilemna.

A description of the problems confronting the older student must include a discussion of the concept that learning capacity declines with age. This attitude, prevalent in our society, is one of the greatest hurdles an adult learner must overcome.

In this research a cohort analysis was employed as a structural category to disentangle the effects of age change from the effects of social change. Using this taxonomy this study takes into account the influences which have affected the changing ideology of women's roles.

A theoretic premise of this research was that the process of school re-entry should be regarded from a dialectical perspective: first, the woman must question her life style in order to explore an opportunity for change; second, when changes occur in one individual, the pattern of interaction with significant others must be renegotiated. Both these personal and interpersonal situations illustrate the classic dialectic pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Method

The following methodology was employed to elicit the information for this research. An initial pilot study was conducted through personal interviews with thirty-seven adult students and twelve professors at local colleges. Based on the results obtained from this study, a 50 item fixed-response questionnaire was developed. This instrument was distributed to 356 female students past traditional college age (defined

in this research as 18-22 years old) at two local colleges. The institutional settings were diverse. Cedar Crest Woman's College, a small, private, suburban college is a four year institution which provides a bachelor's degree in a variety of disciplines. Since 1968 their Program Of Return To Advance Learning (PORTAL) has facilitated the re-entry of mature women into the academic world. Lehigh County Community College, a rural, two year institution, offering an associate's degree has included adults in its curricula since its inception in 1965. The sample of 151 continuing education students who completed the forms consisted of 127 PORTAL students and 24 students from Lehigh County Community College, 84% and 16% respectively. All PORTAL students (256) were contacted by mail; nearly half (N=127) took part. The participants from the community college were volunteers who chose to complete the questionnaires left in the adult student lounge. In all there was a 42% response rate. To provide another perspective of the continuing education woman, the questionnaire included a 10 item fixed response questionnaire for spouse/partners or children over twelve. Relatives of two-thirds the respondents (N=102) completed these forms.

Results

The results of the study indicated that the growing number of adult women who seek a post secondary education are highly motivated students with pragmatic objectives. However, implications drawn from this research must be limited to the type of population from which the data was collected.

The 'typical' continuing education woman in this study was white (97%), and had had some previous college experience. The ages of the respondents ranged from 22 to 65 with the median category 30-34 years old. Sixty percent of these students were married, the majority of their husbands had college degrees, and the families were relatively affluent with incomes of thirty to over forty thousand dollars per year. Nearly two-thirds of the participants had children, women over forty averaged four; younger women had limited family size to two offspring. Of the 151 respondents, 94 (62%) were employed at the time of the study.

Virtually all of the participants viewed their education as an enriching experience. Significantly, despite their diversity in age and marital and/or occupational status the return to school was a self-initiated venture, and the vast majority of these students had specific long term goals. This sense of purpose was of paramount importance; these women had acknowledged their personal and/or professional needs and pursued their scholastic objectives with enthusiasm and determination. These adult learners performed well in school, 90% had a GPA of 3.0 to 4.0, and their academic performances were a source of satisfaction.

Based on the data obtained in this study, it would be valid to conclude that the major problem areas for these older students were exam anxiety, time allotment, and role conflict. Despite their scholastic ability, most students cited an acute fear of exams, although almost none expressed a concern with

failing out of the programs. The problem of time management centered on accommodating the additional requirements of school work into an existing schedule of family and/or work responsibilities. It is possible that both these factors may be rooted in a larger pattern of role conflict; the basically feminine problem that nurturant duties are in opposition to intellectual promise and personal ambition.

Investigation of the attitudes held by the participants revealed certain discrepancies. Although the spectrum of the students' ages closely approximated a bell curve peaking at 34, these women demonstrated an extremely skewed distribution in the perception of their ages with 56% of the participants classifying themselves in 'early adulthood.' This seemingly unrealistic taxonomy can possibly be explained as the older students' attempt to bring their attitude in conjunction with their behavior. Defining themselves as young relieved the students of the stress associated with "off-time" behavior.

Another perspective of the older student was obtained through the questionnaire for relatives of the participants. The nigh response rate, 67%, indicated the interest family members had in the woman's school involvement. The partners (86%), children (8%), parents (2%) and siblings who responded confirmed the students' perception that they were supportive of the return to school. However, the data indicated glaring discrepancies in the partners' analysis of the school situation. Almost half of the spouse/partners noted 'bored at home' as the primary reason for school re-entry, the fourth

category chosen by the women themselves. Furthermore, 1/3 of the partners did not or would not recognize the students' career objectives. These contradictions underscore the point that despite the partner's encouragement, he does not share the woman's view of herself. Significantly, most support was emotional; in regards to household tasks, there was little help from the helpmates.

In other relationships, respondents noted an unexpected consequence of school re-entry was the strained interaction with members of 'old' social networks. While nearly all the participants cited the emotional support of friends made prior to the school experience, they simultaneously stressed the difficulty in maintaining contact, a result of limited time and different priorities. As the students in this study interacted more with college classmates with whom they shared similar interests and problems, they had less contact with former significant others.

Conclusions

An overview of the cohort perspective of the respondents permitted the following conclusions. Although the younger cohorts had grown up in a social milieu more favorable to careers for women and less insistent on marriage and families, cohort membership was not a factor influencing the students' attitude towards women's liberation. Occupational status had a greater effect than age on the respondents' perception of the women's movement. The most significant cohort issue was

that of continuity and discontinuity. For the members of the older age categories, marriage and childbearing had been a serious dislocation of the educational and/or occupational desires. Only after their family responsibilities were fulfilled - when the youngest child was in secondary school, and the family income comfortable - did these women heed inner motivation and proceed toward self-initiated accomplishments. There were several advantages available to these cohort members: they were choosing their courses and potential careers out of interest and desire; additionally, most of them were financially supported by their husbands. The two younger cohorts, in contrast, had experienced little disruption to personal objectives due to marriage and family. They had not suppressed their ambitions but were returning to school for the education necessary to advance in rewarding careers. The younger cohorts were literally continuing their education, but the conflicts between fulfilling the "traditional" nurturant role and developing their own ability had not been resolved. Guilt was a spectre which haunted this study, and concern over possible neglect of children was the cause of most of this anxiety.

The impact of the return to school was vividly demonstrated in three areas, all classic examples of dialectic progression: the confusion over the reasons for re-entry, the discrepancies between the attitudes of students and their

partners, and the unresolved areas of conflict with members of "old" social networks who interpret the student's new behavior as unspoken criticism of the existing order of their lives.

The adult woman who returns to school is taking advantage of the option of school participation. As with any commitment there is a cost, a cost she pays in hard work, and worry, and guilt over violating societal expectations. The women in this study struggled with the doubts and overcame the obstacles. Their personal growth can be calculated in the expansion of their life styles and roles.

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